

To: AFAC.Review@dpfem.tas.gov.au

To the Review Panel:

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Review of the Management of Bushfires During the 2018-19 Fire Season*. With respect to the published terms of reference, I submit the following:

**TOR 1. The causes, chronology and response of the 2018-19 bushfires in Tasmania on and following 28 December 2018.**

The storms of 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019 resulted in approximately 2,400 lightning strikes and caused over 60 new fires. The fires which started to the west of the Picton River on Parks and Wildlife Service managed land, merged with other fires to become the 16<sup>th</sup> January Riveaux Road fire which continued to burn through until the end of March/early April 2019 (11 weeks).

Of particular significance, is that on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019 (four days after it started), the TFS reported that the Riveaux Road fire was only 6.5 ha in size and that they had deployed only 2 light tankers and 1 medium tanker to fight the fire. The fire had increased to 38.6 ha by the 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2019, and the TFS had withdrawn the use of medium tanker. The fire size then increased exponentially. The central question is why did the fire service initially deploy such limited resources when an adequate initial response (using rotary winged aircraft) may have rapidly and relatively easily extinguished the fire(s) before it became essentially unmanageable?

**TOR 3. The timeliness and effectiveness of the fire response and management strategy, including accommodating the priorities of life, property, environmental and cultural values, and timber production and forest asset values by Tasmanian fire agencies.**

According to the Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) mapping, the total burnt area in 2019 is over 200,000 ha, which was predominantly native vegetation and some forestry plantations. This was the largest land area burnt in Tasmania since the 1967 and comprises 3.2% of the state's total mainland area. Almost half of this (about 93,000 ha) is within the TWWHA. This comprises 5.9% of the TWWHA. Importantly, 45,000 ha also burnt in 2013, and then there were the 2016 fires, so about 10% of the TWWHA has been burnt in 6 years, a reflection on the effectiveness of management and control of wildfire fire in Tasmania.

**TOR 4. The impact and effectiveness of fuel management programs in the fire affected areas on the management and containment of the fires.**

The State Government appears to be obsessed with fuel reduction burns as a mechanism to limit the impact of wildfires (see Attachment 1, response from the Premier's Office). This position is in complete variance to the published (2017) CSIRO science<sup>1</sup> that states unequivocally that:

*"Our study has shown that realistic, implementable prescribed-burning plans to reduce fine fuel loads in fire prone Tasmanian grasslands, sedge-lands and dry eucalypt forests have little potential to substantially reduce the extent and intensity of wildfires at a state-wide scale. This would suggest that area-based prescribed-burning targets have little value without some sort of strategic implementation*

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Furlaud, B. Grant, J. Williamson and David M. J. S. Bowman (2017). Simulating the effectiveness of prescribed burning at altering wildfire behaviour in Tasmania, Australia. *International Journal of Wildland Fire*. <https://doi.org/10.1071/WF17061>

*or risk reduction framework, as an immense amount of burning (ie 31% of the State's area) would be required to achieve state-wide reductions in fire extent and intensity".*

Accordingly, there should be an immediate shift from fuel reduction burns to establishing an adequate and immediate first response to wilderness fires. Minimisation of fuel reduction burns would also have significant public health benefits for Tasmanians through minimisation of smoke exposure to residents. Fuel reduction burns should be confined to peri-urban environments to compliment strategic town planning.

**TOR 5. The effectiveness of state, regional and local command, control and co-ordination arrangements, to include agency interoperability and the co-ordination of emergency management activities with government and non-government organisations.**

The extremely slow response to managing and extinguishing the Riveaux Road fire by the TFS either highlights a lack of effectiveness in control or reflects the lack of adequate resourcing provided to the Fire Service by the State Government. It should also be noted that Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) Chief Officer Chris Arnol is reported as having stated *"there was no need to request (further) resources outside Tasmania sic"* (31<sup>st</sup> January 2019, Guardian Newspaper). On the 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2019, PWS spokesperson Ashley Rushton claimed success at protecting wilderness values; *"we have been doing natural value asset protections that have been very, very successful"*. At the time, approximately 180,000 ha had been burnt, about half within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA).

**TOR 6. The effectiveness of the arrangements in place for requesting and managing interstate and international assistance and the significance of interstate and international assistance in managing the fires.**

TFS Chief Officer Chris Arnol stated that *"the remote area firefighting is the ... where we ran out of capacity."* He acknowledged that without the help of interstate and NZ personnel *"we wouldn't have been able to tackle them all (the fires) simultaneously ... we would have had to just prioritise them."* (6<sup>th</sup> April, Mercury newspaper).

It is essential that the Australian Defence Force has an increased focus and capacity to respond to natural disasters including wildfire response under State direction. The Australian Air Force/Army should be trained to operate and equipped with fixed and rotary winged aircraft dedicated to aerial firefighting operations, and this should be co-ordinated through an adequately funded and re-invigorated National Aerial Firefighting Centre. In addition, Australian Army personnel should be trained and deployed as necessary in on-ground remote area firefighting. Where appropriate, this would allow remote area fires like those in Tasmania to be controlled earlier, and at much less final expense. A remote area bushfire/wildfire fighting capability in the nation's defence force would be consistent with other jurisdictions, such as the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand, all of which have a remote area bushfire/wildfire capability in their career and volunteer forces for use alongside civilian firefighting resources.

**TOR 7. The use and effectiveness of aviation firefighting resources, in particular, the suitability of aircraft types for the protection of environmental values, forest assets and the rural/urban interface in Tasmania.**

Tasmania (and Australia) needs to adopt a world's best practice approach to aerial firefighting. The utility of rotary winged aircraft in fighting the Tasmanian fires was easily demonstrated when they were finally made available in adequate numbers long after the Tasmanian fires had been ignited.

**TOR 8. Any other matter that the Review team identifies in the course of its activities as warranting discussion.**

Dry lightning ignitions have become much more common since 2000. A drying climate is almost certainly a factor. The PWS/TFS needs to urgently review its priorities and operations to protect Tasmania's outstanding natural values in the face of climate change<sup>2</sup>. Because foot access in fire conditions is difficult and dangerous, the most obvious means to combat the fire is through intensive water-bombing. Fixed and rotary wing fire-fighting resources from Australia should be on standby for immediate deployment in Tasmania wilderness areas in the next fire season to protect not only human communities but also irreplaceable natural heritage. To lose these wilderness areas would be a catastrophe of global magnitude. Additionally, the financial cost to fight uncontained fires, and the financial and health impacts to fire affected Tasmanian communities, from fires that were not contained quickly in 2019 needs no re-iteration.

Thank you  
David Haynes

2/5/2019

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/09/former-fire-chiefs-warn-australia-unprepared-for-escalating-climate-threat>

## **Attachment One: Hodgman Email**

Subject: Letter from the Premier, Hon Will Hodgman MP  
Date: Mon, 18 Mar 2019 05:17:10 +0000  
From: The Premier (DPaC) <premier@dpac.tas.gov.au>

Dear Mr Haynes

Thank you for your email of 10 February 2019. I apologise for the delay in responding. The Tasmanian Government recognises that climate change is a serious issue that requires local, national and international action.

As you note, in January 2019 Tasmania experienced a significant bushfire event. This followed previous bushfires in 2013 and 2016 which caused extensive damage to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). The TWWHA Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project confirmed that Tasmania is likely to experience increasing bushfire risk in the future as a result of a changing climate, including more frequent extreme weather events and a longer, more intense fire season.

Tasmania's firefighting agencies have the Government's full support to suppress the fires as quickly as possible. The Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) has called on the support of more than 100 professionals from interstate and overseas with a large number of aerial assets here helping to support our efforts too. The TFS continues to be actively involved with the Bushfire and Natural Hazard Cooperative Research Centre, Australian Fire and Emergency Management Conference, National Aerial Firefighting Centre and other national research and development forums relevant to the emergency services sector.

The Government is committed to protecting the TWWHA, with \$4million in current funding allocated for bushfire management in the TWWHA, this supports broad-scale fire mitigation activities, primarily fuel reduction burning, to reduce the risk of fires impacting on TWWHA values. It also assists in protecting critical electricity generation and transmission infrastructure inside and adjacent to the TWWHA.

In addition, the Government has committed \$55 million to a dedicated fuel reduction burning program across the State, which is ongoing. This program has already resulted in a number of planned fuel reduction burns that have increased our ability to protect life and assets, our natural and cultural values and wilderness areas.

Thank you again for writing to me.  
Yours sincerely

Hon Will Hodgman MP

Premier  
Minister for Tourism, Hospitality and Events  
Minister for Parks  
Minister for Heritage  
Minister for Trade  
Level 11 15 Murray Street HOBART TAS 7000 Australia  
GPO Box 123 HOBART TAS 7001 Australia  
Ph: +61 3 6165 7650  
Email: Premier@dpac.tas.gov.au